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ADDING TO THE MYSTERIES OF THE SEA

Pirate Tales in the Present Tense Supplant Those of Long John Silver. Tides Turn and Turn but the Grim Riddle of Missing Ships Is Unanswered

By Arthur Chapman

Illustration by Albert Levering

BOLSHEVIK pirates—the newest recruits to an ancient and daring profession—are thought to have had a hand in the disappearance of several ships at sea during the last few months. Also, the same human agency is believed to have been responsible for the wrecking of the Carol A. Deering, a five-masted schooner which ran ashore off the coast of North Carolina last January with all sails set and with nobody aboard.

All these theories about pirates are not the privately held opinions of people who know little or nothing about seafaring and general conditions on the modern highways of maritime trade. Officials of the United States government, unable to reach any other conclusion, have advanced the startling idea that piracy has been responsible for so many ship disappearances and that agents of the Bolsheviki have recruited crews which have mutinied and have imprisoned their officers and sailed for ports which are under the control of the ambitious Messrs. Lenine and Trotzky.

If the question of piracy does not enter, then those who are speculating with regard to the disappearance of these vessels are thrown back to the age-old queries which have been heard ever since ships began to disappear and leave no trace. In old days when such a mystery came to the fore, it was assumed that the vessel or vessels had gone to the "Port of Missing Ships," which in the popular mind was the Sargasso Sea—that strange expanse of seaweed and wreckage, drawn together by a convergence of tides and currents. Once caught in this sea, it was supposed that a ship would drift about in a gigantic whirlpool, held fast by cumbering seaweed, doomed to float in a monotonous circle through the years until storms or decay finally sent it to the bottom. Nor is it so very long since that theory was exploded. It was not until the expedition of the Michael Sars, under Sir John Murray and the Norwegian government in 1910, that it was proved that the seadrift of the Sargasso was only in patches and was not dense enough to hold a ship.

Sea monsters, large enough to destroy ships, have been blamed for the disappearance of many a craft that sailed forth and never returned. About the stanchest supporter of the sea monster theory, and the one who secured the greatest following, was the Norwegian bishop, Pontoppidan, who, in the seventeenth century, wrote a complete description of the kraken, or deep sea monster. The kraken, as the bishop painted it, was enough to strike terror to any simple soul who contemplated a sea change.

According to this Norwegian authority, when fishermen who had sailed out for miles found the water to be only twenty or thirty fathoms deep, instead of eighty or one hundred fathoms as it should have been, they knew they were fishing over the kraken, and they made haste to change their location. After they had pulled to deeper soundings they would see the monster come to the surface. Only its back would be exposed, a mile or two in circumference, and like small islands cumbered by seaweed. From these islands would project bright horns as long as the masts of stout ships. These were the animal's arms, capable of dragging down the largest war vessels. One of these monsters is reported to have come ashore in 1080 at Alstabourg. It was a young kraken and playful, and while attempting to uproot some pine trees along the shore it was caught in a rocky cleft and effectively blocked the harbor. There it died, and the stench was great indeed.

The sea monster still maintains its hold in the imagination of many people, though there may be no widespread belief in the kraken any more. In 1817 and 1819 monsters of terrifying size and mien appeared off Gloucester and Nahant, according to reports at that time, and Atlantic City's sea serpent in the '80s was the talk of the country and did more to attract attention to that sprightly center of amusement than all the convention press-agenting of recent years. Skippers come in every once in a while with stories of sea monsters encountered at various latitudes, and a few weeks ago one was able to direct the attention of a scientific party to the floating remains of a sea animal the like of which had never been seen. But the idea of monsters large enough to destroy vessels has gradually died out. Besides, vessels have grown so in size in late years that even the kraken of old would have hard work to wrestle one to the bottom.

The Spanish seafarers did not go in so much for belief in the responsibility of monsters for the disappearance of their ships which left no trace. The Spaniards laid a lot of such disappearances to the "vigia," a word meaning "look out." The "vigia" were rocky pinnacles, or small islets, level with or just below the surface of the water. Some such islets actually exist, as search has proved, though few have been found in proportion to those believed to exist. There is the Rockall, seventy or eighty feet above the water, about 200 miles northeast of the coast of Ireland. That rock has been responsible for the destruction of many a ship. There are similar menaces to navigation called the Rocks of Penede de St. Pedro, which were landed on in 1852, after many Dutch ships had been lost there. Atkin's Rock figures in Purdy's Memoir of the Atlantic Ocean. It was first spoken of in 1740. The mate on a ship from which it was espied threw overboard a barrel to mark the spot. But when he put about, neither the island nor the barrel could be found. The island was described as covered with seaweed and about the size of a ship's dory turned bottom upward. Because of this rock—six vessels being missing from Glasgow in 1821—the British Admiralty authorized a search. Five vessels made several cruises during two seasons but found nothing.

Such are some of the darkly mysterious agencies believed to have caused the loss of ships in earlier days. When the wireless came into general use it was believed that much of the dread mystery of the sea would be done away with. Yet all the ships which disappeared during the early months of this year were equipped with wireless. One of these ships was the American steamer Hewitt, which left Sabine, Tex., for Boston and Portland, Me., on January 21 and has been posted overdue since February 5. Others were the Norwegian barkentine Florio, out from Norway since December 1, bound for Hampton Roads; the Norwegian sailing ship, Svartskog, out from Hampton Roads since October, bound for Norway with a crew of fourteen, and a Spanish ship of the Larrinaga Line, missing since March. The Florio was spoken in foreign waters when she was fourteen days out of port. Since then nothing has been heard from her. On that ship Captain Knudsen and his young wife were on their honeymoon.

If these ships were seized by Bolshevik pirates, the Deering and the Hewitt fell into unlawful hands in American waters. The Deering was ashore at Diamond Shoals with all sails set. On the same night an unknown steamer passed close enough to the Frying Pan Shoals Lightship to be spoken. The lightship endeavored to get the steamer to take a message but received no response. The theory has been advanced that this was a Bolshevik steamer, to which the crew of the Deering was transferred. If the captain and the entire crew were lost in rough water while trying to make shore in small boats, as claimed by officials of the Weather Bureau, it is believed that some trace of them would have been found. As it is, the only hint of the reason for the Carol A. Deering's strange abandonment is found in a message picked up in a bottle. This message has been proved to be in the handwriting of the Deering's mate, and said that the writer had been taken prisoner.

The daughter of Captain Wormwell of the Deering has been insistent all along that her father and his crew were the victims of pirates. The theory has been advanced that Bolsheviki on a smaller boat, desirous of getting away from this country, were on the lookout for an oceangoing craft which they could seize. They made the effort to take the Deering, but the ship was beached. Realizing that it was necessary to leave no trace behind, the Bolsheviki may have transferred the crew of the Deering to their own vessel. Wreckers at work on the Deering are said to have established the fact that the vessel was thoroughly looted.

Another theory concerning the Deering was that she collided with the Hewitt and the crew was transferred to the latter vessel which later sank with all on board. This theory was exploded when it was found that the Deering bore no marks of any collision. The Weather Bureau officials have been insistent from the first that no question of piracy has been involved, and that the Deering's crew attempted to escape in the ship's launch and small boats in rough weather and were swamped, and that the Hewitt and other ships missing since the first of the year were lost in a series of gales which swept the coast.

That Bolshevist piracy exists has been proved in an official account, issued by the State Department, concerning the seizure of the Cuxhaven fishing schooner, Senator Schroeder, by a mutinous crew. The Schroeder, according to the official statement, was confiscated by its crew in the name of the Soviet government and taken to the port of Murmansk. Later the crew again stole the vessel and returned it to Cuxhaven. After being kept in jail at Murmansk for a while the captain, engineer and mate were taken to Petrograd, and later were allowed to return to Germany. All the mutineers, on the return of the craft, were captured, tried and sentenced to prison.

The Bolsheviki are said to be desirous of securing ships, and a plot for the seizure of many vessels was uncovered in a police raid in New York last year, according to members of the bomb squad. Rear Admiral L. M. Nulton, commandant of the Mare Island Navy Yard, is authority for the statement that it would be possible for a vessel to hoist the black flag and prey upon commerce for a limited period without detection. The inevitable discovery would come when the pirate craft had to put into some port for repairs.

The case of the Schroeder has served to recall that of the Bounty, which was seized by a mutinous crew, December 23, 1787. In this case the mutiny was unpremediated and arose from the crew's dissatisfaction with its treatment at the hands of Captain Bligh, who was an exacting though brave and efficient officer. The captain and eighteen loyal men were set adrift in a small boat in the South Seas, where the Bounty had gone for a cargo of breadfruit trees for the government. The mutineers landed at Pitcairn Island and burned the ship. Here they founded a colony, taking native women as wives. In 1814 they were found, a peaceful, law-abiding community, ruled by John Adams, one of the mutineers. In 1830 the colony removed to Norfolk Island, west of Pitcairn. Descendants of the Bounty's mutineers are still living and occasionally writing magazine articles.

The Bounty's case was one of the few where mutinous uprisings did not lead to open piracy. Generally a mutiny was followed by the hoisting of a black flag, on the theory that the crew had committed a hanging offense anyway.

If Bolshevism is responsible for a recrudescence of piracy, it will not be the first time that the pirate's calling has had the sanction of government in one form or another. In Homeric days piracy was an honorable calling. From the eighth to the eleventh centuries the Norse Vikings, who ruled the northern seas, were national heroes. The Moslems who preyed on Mediterranean commerce, and the Barbary corsairs, who struck swiftly in their galleys, which were patterned after the craft of ancient Greece and Rome, had more or less of government connivance behind them always. It was only when the laws of the sea became harsh that the pirate had to go "on his own" and carry on his work without hope of support elsewhere.

If the Bolshevists have revived organized piracy they have chosen a historic setting for their first pairing of the black flag with the red. The coast where the Deering went ashore with all her sails set was patroled by the murderous Edward Tench, "Blackbeard," who watched for the commerce in and out of Charleston Harbor and made free with everything that promised rich returns. Tench believed in marooning and in free use of the plank. To-day, even if a Bolshevist crew came into possession of a ship, it is hardly likely that the skilled men aboard would meet any harsh fate. They would be needed to navigate the ship even more than in the old sailing days. Who does not remember the passage from Treasure Island where Long John Silver says to his too-eager cutthroat companions, "We are all foremast hands. We can steer a course, but who is to set one?" One can imagine the satisfaction with which the officers of the Deering would be received on a craft just taken by the Bolsheviki, with the nearest Soviet port thousands of miles away and no one among the proletariat "faithful" posessing seamanship enough to navigate the ship.

Even if the question of piracy is to be dismissed, the case of the Deering ranks with that of the Marie Celeste. As in the case of the Deering, no one was found aboard the Marie Celeste, which has furnished material for endless speculation and has been made the basis of more than one novel of mystery. The Marie Celeste was a brig which sailed from New York in September, 1872, under Captain Ben Griggs. There were thirteen aboard, including the captain's wife and seven-year-old daughter. Their twelve-year-old son had begged to be allowed to go, but the captain decided that the boy must stay in New York and attend school. The brig was found on December 5 by the British barque Dei Gratia, abandoned in perfect condition near Gibraltar. Captain Boyce of the barque found the remains of a half-eaten meal in the cabin of the Marie Celeste. One of the members of the captain's family had just cracked an egg when there came the strange summons which took them all on deck. There was no sign of disorder. There had been no mention of bad weather in the Captain's log, which was completed within forty-eight hours of the day on which the ship was abandoned. The brig's small boat was in place, which deepened the mystery.

The case of the Marie Celeste attracted world-wide attention. The shrewdest minds could make nothing satisfactory of any solution. One theory was that a tidal wave washed everybody overboard. This was held untenable because a wave of such proportions would have done some damage to the ship. Another theory was that the captain's family had gone swimming and that in trying to rescue some one the captain and eventually the

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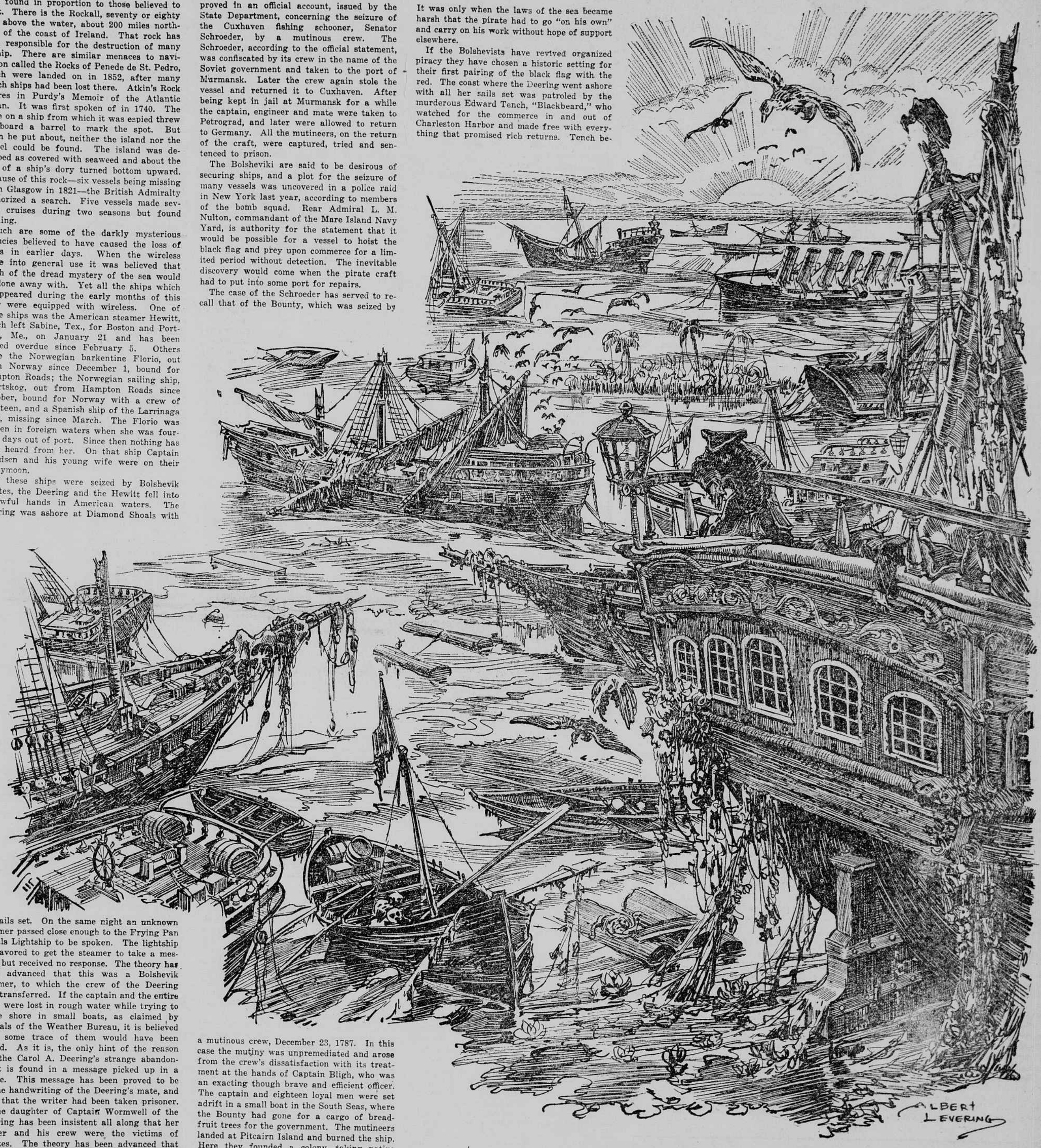

THE PORT OF MISSING SHIPS

Once caught in the Sargasso Sea, it was supposed a ship would drift about in a gigantic whirlpool, held fast by cumbering seaweed, doomed to float in a monotonous circle through the years until storms or decay finally sent it to the bottom. Not until 1910 was this age-old belief shown to be without foundation